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The Empirical Study of Democracy: Setting a Research Agenda

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/78x7984g>

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Publication Date

2005-03-03

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Despite strong theoretical interest among political theorists and a growing reliance on deliberative practices across many of the western democracies, relatively little systematic research has been done on citizen deliberation.¹ With interest in this topic now emerging among empirically oriented political scientists, my aim in this paper is to offer direction for this nascent research effort. In so doing, I suggest that the research must begin by identifying the key assumptions of deliberative democratic theory and treating these assumptions as hypotheses to be explored. This must be followed by an attempt to use any disconfirming results of the empirical research as a basis for reconstructing deliberative democratic theory and for offering new guidelines for deliberative democratic practice.

At its core, deliberative democratic theory depends on a very specific psychology of the citizen participant and a complementary social psychology of discourse. A key psychological assumption of deliberative democratic theory is that if an institutional arrangement is made that creates the opportunity for free and equal deliberation, the citizen participants will be able to engage one another in the manner required. At issue here is the capacities and inclinations of the individuals involved. Clearly even the creation of ideal conditions of discourse will be a vain exercise if individuals lack the ability to take advantage of the opportunity provided. Furthermore, if individuals have sufficiently limited capacities to understand themselves and their circumstances or to be the authors of their own preferences and aspirations, the individualist emphasis on autonomy of most normative democratic theory is itself called into question.

A related and equally critical assumption speaks to the quality of the discursive interaction between individuals. The assumption here is that discourse is a malleable and ultimately derivative medium of personal expression. It is structured by individuals' purposes and understandings and consists of the particular moves those individuals make. In this light, deliberative democratic theory assumes that if conditions allow and individuals are properly motivated, citizen discourse will involve an exchange of reasons oriented to establishing agreements based on shared understanding and judgment. However the appropriate purposes and sufficient capacities of individuals may prove irrelevant if discourse has its own intrinsic structure that orchestrates the exchange between people in a way that inhibits the kind of constructive exchange imagined by democratic theorists. For example, if discourse consists of a ritualized exchange of speech acts or a simple exchange of assertions of preference or belief, it is unlikely to foster or even allow reasoned argument. Similarly, if discourse is structured more as a competitive exchange, it may prevent collaboration and thereby reinforce rather than bridge existing social cleavages. In such cases, the possibility of a reasoned discourse and the value of citizen deliberation are called into question.

With these concerns in mind, I offer a closer discussion of the theoretical assumptions of deliberative democratic theory and the empirical research they require. This is followed by a more speculative discussion of the likely results of this research and its implications for the further development of deliberative democratic theory.

Theoretical Assumptions and Research Hypotheses: Citizen Capacities

While there is some variation in emphasis, most American theorists offer a view of the democratic citizen that is consistent with the one presented by John Rawls (1993). Rather than offering an empirical psychology of individual citizenship, Rawls stipulated what democratic theory requires. In this vein, he argues that the democratic citizens must necessarily all have the same basic capacity for reasonableness and rationality. In their reasonableness, democratic citizens can consider general principles of interaction (constitutional essentials) and fairly consider the claims of another in that other person's terms. In their rationality, they can consider their own preferences relative to their overall life plan and their concept of the good. Rawls also claims that individuals must have the basic cognitive capacity to argue with reasons, to recognize criteria of justification, to understand rules of evidence, to be logical and to reflect on their own presuppositions.

More concerned with what individuals will do rather than with stipulating what they must do, more deliberatively oriented theorists vacillate between a Rawlsian assumption of reasonableness, rationality and logic and a concern that individuals, on their own, may not be sufficiently motivated to demonstrate these necessary qualities. In addressing the latter concern, they argue that it is the deliberative circumstance itself which helps orient individuals to reflect and interact in a way that is more logical, rational, just, considerate of others, self-critical and oriented to the common good (e.g., Gutman and Thompson, 1996; Cohen, 1997; Dryzek, 2000 and Benhabib, 2001). The assumption here is that even if individuals do not have fully developed capacities along these lines, they still have the requisite ability to participate in deliberation and can readily develop their skills as required in this context.

In deliberative democratic theory, it is because individuals have the aforementioned capacities that reasoned discourse and democratic deliberation become possible. Because participants are rational, they are able to reflect upon and thereby come to their own considered judgment regarding their own and other people's claims. Because they are reasonable, they are able to respect the integrity and subjective perspective of others. In this vein, they are able to afford others the opportunity to speak freely and to have their claims seriously considered. This recognition of the perspective of the other leads to the justification of claims with reasons that are intended to be persuasive to the other which in turn encourages the recognition or construction of a common set of assumptions upon which arguments may be built. It also leads to an overriding concern for justice as fairness and the common good. This tendency to respect the integrity or autonomy of individuals and to treat them equally will not only be evident in the conduct of deliberation, it will also be evident in its outcomes.

Of course all of this is a matter of assumption. The question is: Do people in fact have the requisite abilities to participate in a deliberation in the rational, other-oriented, self-reflective and just manner required by democratic deliberation? This more general question suggests a number of more specific concerns, each of which in turn suggests hypotheses that may be addressed in empirical research. First there is the question of how people think about their own attitudes and beliefs. At issue here is the assumption of the self-reflective rationality of the citizen participants. In a deliberative setting, do individuals participate in a way that suggests that they are integrating their various preferences by placing them relative to higher order goals and values that they have? Going beyond the stipulations of Rawls and those who build on his work, we might also address the more emancipatory interests of Habermas and ask whether, in the course of a deliberation, individuals reflect on their own higher order or underlying values themselves. Do the individual participants try to integrate their own underlying values and, beyond this, do they try to critically consider their truth or rightness?

A second question to be addressed is how people orient to one another. The focus here is on the assumption that participants in a deliberation are reasonable. Part of the concern here is attitudinal. Do participants value one another as persons deserving of freedom and equal status? Does this extend to respecting each other's place in the deliberation? This according of respect has several important aspects in a communicative setting. These include participating in ways that recognize that: (1) the other has the capacity to contribute significantly to the deliberation, (2) the other's preferences and beliefs may be substantially different than one's own, and (3) it is important to try to make the other understand and agree with one's own claims. In addition to exploring the individual's orientation to the other, it is also important to assess the individual's belief regarding how the other is orienting to him. Does the individual believe that the other is also participating in the deliberation in a reasonable way? This leads to the broader question of how individual participants view the deliberation itself. Do they in fact view it as a cooperative exercise in which all are participating in an attempt to better understand a problem or situation at hand and to judge better the value of various alternative solutions or courses of action? Again addressing more Habermasian concerns, do participants consider the role of culture and social context in shaping their social position in the deliberation and the kind of discourse in which they are engaging?

Associated with these assumptions of the rationality and reasonableness of citizen participants are more fundamental assumptions regarding individual's cognitive capacities. Do individuals reason in such a way that they are making logical inferences from more particular claims and judgments to more general ones and vice versa? Are individuals capable of generating and understanding more general, abstract or higher order considerations of truth and rightness? These logical capacities are critical to any attempt to reflect on one's own and others' substantive beliefs and preferences so as to construct more general understandings and principles that may then be used to integrate the differing individual perspectives expressed.

The pursuit of these questions regarding the capacities of individuals raises two issues regarding the design of appropriate empirical research. The first regards the context in which these individual capacities are examined. Given their psychological character, there may be a tendency to assess the individual's capacities and orientations through methods (experimental or survey) that involve observing how he or she behaves when alone. While the results of research designed in this way may be suggestive, it would be more appropriate to assess the relevant capacities in the context of deliberation itself. Innumerable social psychological studies suggest the context specificity of much individual behavior. To insure its own internal validity, research should focus on specific aspects of individuals' communicative practices as they are enacted in interactive settings. This may be explored in two person dialogues, but examining individual performances in a group deliberation would be more appropriate.

The second design issue speaks to how individual capacities are initially conceived. Thus the liberal view of democratic deliberation would suggest that, neurophysiological defects aside, all adult participants in a discourse will have basically the same capacity to be rational, reasonable and logical. Posed as a research question, the hypothesis becomes: Do people participate in a conversation that is rational, reasonable and logical in the manner suggested? The result will be either to confirm the hypothesis or to show evidence of substandard reasoning and performance. In the latter case, the most the research will be able to tell us is what people or their communicative practices are not. The net result will be either to provide support for the claims of much deliberative democratic theory or, alternatively, to suggest the theory is importantly flawed. Given a vast amount of cognitive and socio-cognitive research that suggests that individuals are not fully logical and therefore not likely to be fully rational or reasonable in the manner suggested by liberal democratic theory, I suggest that the research be designed to explore the various ways in which people reason and thus the various forms which their rationality and reasonableness may take.² Apart from building on other research and thus being more likely to offer a

more comprehensive and elucidating account of communicative practices, research designed to explore different forms of rationality and reasonableness may go beyond constituting a critique of deliberative democratic theory to providing an evidentiary basis for reconstructing that theory. An additional benefit is that such a design would allow for a more nuanced account of possible effects of participation in a deliberation on the individuals participating.

Theoretical Assumptions and Research Hypotheses: Qualities of Deliberative Discourse

Even more central to deliberative democratic theory are its assumptions about the nature of the qualities of deliberative discourse. Some of these speak to the relationship between participants and revolve around the specifically democratic concern of equality. The question here is: When the institutional conditions are favorable (e.g., individuals are instructed that they are equal participants and each is allocated an equal opportunity to speak), what is the effective distribution of power in the deliberative group? This leads to research that focuses on the relative frequency and length with which different individuals speak, the manner in which their contributions are taken up by others and the effect they have on the course of conversation and collective decision-making.

Other assumptions stipulate qualities of the deliberation at the level of the group itself. One set of concerns focuses on the strategic and normative orientations of the deliberation. Are deliberations orchestrated by the norms of collaboration that democratic theory demands? Alternatively are deliberations structured more competitively or are participants not really engaging one another at all? An additional question that may be addressed is the nature of the foundational beliefs and values that anchor the deliberation. Are they democratic and do they revolve around a concern for autonomy, equality and justice as fairness, or do other kinds of beliefs and values anchor the discourse? Alternatively are deliberations typically fragmented in a way that suggests that they are not anchored by any single set of foundational assumptions?

A second set of considerations speaks to the logic of the deliberative discourse. The focus here is on the rules that govern the interactions among participants and serve to organize their deliberation. For example, what are the rules that determine how different speakers' comments must follow on another? Do they require that that comments of one speaker be related to each other and to the comments of another speaker according to rules of logical deduction inference? Or do the discourse rules simply require that speakers' comments retain a common substantive focus, thus allowing for narratives expressing a speaker's personal experience or preference that do not include the provision of reasons and do not necessarily address the comments of other speakers? In a similar vein, how is the overall deliberation organized. Is that organization directly addressed in a way that involves a discussion of a working definition of a general subject matter and its aspects and followed by a discussion of an agenda or order to the subsequent deliberation? Or does the organization of the deliberation emerge without direct consideration and therefore does discussion simply revolve around a specific concrete topic that each participant addresses in his or her own idiosyncratic fashion? Or a third alternative, is discourse structured by the way in which each individual's contribution reflects loosely associated memories cued by the comments of an earlier speaker such that the overall organization of the discourse is quite fluid with easy shifts from one topic and subject to the next?

The foregoing concern with the logic or structure of deliberative discourses relates to the more specific interest that deliberative democratic theory has in the nature of political argument. The theory stipulates that people should advance their claims as arguments, thereby providing reasons for the claims of fact and value that they make. The questions that arise here are: Do people typically provide reasons for their own claims and when someone fails to do so, do they typically request that reasons be provided?

What is the nature of the reasons that are provided? In the latter regard, it is important to remember that deliberative democratic theory requires that the reasons be logically linked to the claims made and be cast in a way that others are persuaded because their own basic values and assumptions are invoked. The research question then is: are the justifications offered viewed as compelling by those to whom they are addressed? At issue here is both the intention of those advancing the claims and the reaction of the listeners. Also quite important is the ground to which these reasons or justifications appeal. In the view of theorists influenced by Rawls, these reasons should appeal to basic foundational beliefs and values that the various participants in the deliberation share. The empirical question is this: Are reasons cast in these terms and do these reasons have a greater effect on collective outcomes when they are? Finally research must address how disagreements are resolved. Is agreement achieved and if so, on what basis? Does it involve acceptance of logical argument that appeals to common assumptions? Alternatively does it involve reference to the specific dictates of conventional authorities or to what is typical or ritual practice? If disagreement persists, how it is dealt with? Is it acknowledged in a way that respects the integrity and difference between the parties involved or does it lead to the parties devaluing each other, thereby creating enduring social divisions within the deliberative group?

The investigation of the foregoing hypotheses on deliberative processes sets a demanding task for political scientists. The social sciences in general have not typically focused on social interaction, favoring the more manageable task of looking at individuals' characteristics and activities or the institutional and static features of groups. These are relevant to the empirical investigation of deliberation but do not directly address the intersubjective/interactive quality of what transpires in a deliberation. Social psychologists interested in small group behavior and sociolinguists have tried to address this concern, but rarely in ways that are directly relevant to the concerns of expressly democratic deliberation. Consequently a key task for research will be to elaborate the definition of deliberative processes along the lines suggested by the above research questions with the aim of devising appropriate ways to operationalizing the resulting concepts. Unfortunately only little help is offered by deliberative democratic theory. It has focused on the conditions of deliberation and assumed that something that has been deemed to be broadly a matter of reasonable and logical argument will follow. Consequently, relatively little attention has been paid to the explication of discursive processes themselves.

In exploring deliberative processes, I suggest that research go beyond testing the degree to which those processes meet the standards of coherence, logic and an orientation to justice and the common good suggested by deliberative democratic theory. While of some value, the limitation of research of this kind is that it can do no more than support the assumptions of the theory or suggest that its view of deliberative processes is incorrect. Insofar as the latter is the case, it would be much more helpful if the research was guided by an understanding of discourse that recognized alternative forms of discourse and did so in a way that was relevant to democratic theory.³ Again the value of such a design is that it would enable a more comprehensive and positive description of how deliberations actually unfold and thereby provide a basis for an attempt to correct or reconstruct deliberative democratic theory and practice.

Theoretical Assumptions and Research Hypotheses: The Consequences of Deliberation for the Group and the Individual Participants

A final set of theoretical claims relate to the outcomes of deliberation, both for the group as a whole and for the individual participants. Deliberative democratic theorists have made a variety of suggestions regarding the likely effects of deliberation on collective decision-making. The general claim here is that, in a number of different ways, deliberations produce better decisions. Pooling the ideas of the different participants and subjecting these ideas to collective, reasoned deliberation is assumed to yield more

innovative and effective policy recommendations. In addition, the involvement of the affected parties in an effort to come to agreement is assumed to produce recommendations that are fairer and are perceived to be more legitimate. These theoretical claims are not easily tested, in part because operationalizing the dependent variables is not a straightforward matter and the claims made are relative ones. Still a clear definition of criteria should yield reliable judgments of the quality of final decisions and the use of control groups and procedures should allow for the requisite comparative evaluation.

In addition to improving the quality of collective decisions and policy recommendations, theorists also suggest that democratic deliberation will help bridge existing social cleavages and help build community. In the exchange of reasoned views and arguments, it is assumed that the participants will uncover underlying beliefs and values that they hold in common. In addition they will acquire direct experience of their own capacity to interact cooperatively. In sum, the deliberative experience will serve to build positive connections among individuals from different and somewhat estranged sub-groups of a society. Contradicting these claims, critics suggest that such face-to-face encounters will only serve to underscore differences and lead to competitive interaction. As result, deliberation is likely to reinforce rather than eliminate social divisions. These competing claims are readily subject to pre-test/post-test and experimental/control group comparisons of people's attitudes toward the larger community in which they all live and the degree and quality of their interaction with others in that community from whom they are typically divided.

Deliberative democratic theory also suggests that deliberation benefits the individuals involved. One set of benefits relate directly to the development of citizenship. The claims here are that participation in deliberative discussions: (1) exposes individuals to new information that is learned thereby making them more knowledgeable, (2) enables individuals to elaborate and test out their own views leading to greater clarity about and stronger commitment to political views, and (3) provides individuals an opportunity to contribute directly to collective decision-making thus increasing their sense of political efficacy and their likelihood of partaking in other forms of political participation. A second set of benefits the participants in deliberation may accrue is more social in nature. The suggestion here is that participation in deliberation encourages individuals to develop a greater sense of belonging to the larger community and to feel a greater sense of recognition by people who are not a part of their own circle of family, friends and acquaintances. In addition, the deliberative experience is assumed to make individuals more aware of the different views and experiences of other members of the community and thus more capable of taking perspectives other than their own. Finally a third set of benefits is more explicitly psychological. Here the claim is that participation in a reasoned discourse that demands reflecting on one's own views, the views of others and the possible ground that may be shared is likely to foster a development in the individual's capacity to reason. Although the dependent variables suggested by the foregoing claims regarding individual benefits are more or less difficult to operationalize, some measurement is possible and a straightforward pretest-posttest comparison of the relevant knowledge, attitudes, orientations and capacities of the participants should allow for a clear evaluation of the validity of the theoretical claims made.

Empirical Research and the Reconstruction of Deliberative Democratic Theory: Some Speculations and their Implications

In the preceding sections, an attempt was made to translate the specific claims made by deliberative democratic theory into a set of hypotheses that may be tested through empirical research. For the most part, research guided by these concerns would be designed to confirm or disconfirm existing deliberative democratic theory. While important, research must also consider taking a more reconstructive role and

thus contribute more directly to the future theorizing. To illustrate, I will draw on my own work to suggest the direction that this more reconstructive effort may take.

In earlier research, I examined the different ways people understand and evaluate political phenomena (Rosenberg 2002). This typically involved the use of a combination of semi-structured interviews and clinical experiments to assess the general qualities of people's reasoning and judgment. Building on this work on political reasoning, I have begun to study the kind of communicative competence each type of reasoning is likely to foster (Rosenberg 2003a). The focus here is on the ways in which individuals engage in argument about social and political issues. In a manner consistent with the majority of research in social and developmental psychology, my research suggests that only a small minority of individuals demonstrate deliberative rationality, that is the requisite capacity to reflect on their preferences and organize them with regard to higher order goals or overarching life-plans. More typically, people have preferences that they simply assert when judging an event or policy suggestion. When that preference is called into question, they simply re-assert it or marshal some sort of defense that involves bringing to bear other preferred factors (of a similarly concrete nature) in support of the initial judgment. Similarly only a small minority of people demonstrate deliberative reasonableness and thus take the perspective of another and make arguments that are persuasive in his terms. More typically people do not build an integrated view of another person's preferences and beliefs such that they can interpret the meaning of their own or the other person's claims in that other person's terms. Consequently their approach to asserting claims and giving reasons tends to be largely egocentric.

Importantly the research is not designed to examine what people fail to do nor is it designed on the assumption that all individuals will perform in the same way. Thus the results of the research suggest more than the fact that most individuals do not have the capacities assumed by deliberative democratic theorists. The results also provide evidence of theoretically important differences in cognitive and deliberative capacities across individuals. This raises a number of problems for deliberative democratic theory. To begin there is the impact that differing capacities have on deliberative engagement. The problem here is that some or most deliberations will not have the reasoned, integrative and potentially critical quality that democratic theory requires. In addition, the existence of individual differences in capacity to deliberate also suggests that in a given deliberation, individuals' participation will be practically unequal even if the conditions of deliberation confers a formal equality. The foregoing two points are critical as the first robs deliberation of some of its practical utility and the second questions its normative value.

If the consideration of the impact of individual differences in capacity on the quality of deliberation raises certain problems for deliberative democratic theory, a complementary consideration of the impact of different forms of deliberative engagement on the development of an individual's cognitive and communicative capacities suggest certain directions for a solution. I offer a theoretical discussion of the nature of the dynamic interplay between forms of cognition and discourse elsewhere (see Rosenberg 2003, Chapter 2). Here I simply hypothesize that if deliberations were designed with the limitations of the participants in mind, two goals might be accomplished. First more reasoned and just processes and outcomes might be obtained. Second the deliberation might provide a context for the further development of the participants' existing deliberative capacities. If the first goal constitutes a temporary corrective for the problem of individual incapacity and substandard deliberative engagement, the second suggests the possibility of a more permanent solution. In either case, the consideration of the nature and design of deliberation necessarily shifts away from the more typical focus on establishing conditions and processes that free individuals to do what they already can. Instead attention turns to establishing conditions and processes that guide individuals so that they can achieve a potential that they possess but have not realized.

The foregoing shift in focus alters the agenda both for empirical research and for deliberative democratic theory. A new question emerges as central. Insofar as people do lack the necessary abilities and deliberative groups do not conduct their discussions in the desired fashion, is it possible to structure deliberations so as to improve the quality of the discourse that occurs? This calls for research that looks at different ways of facilitating deliberation and the impact these facilitative efforts have on the quality of the discourse, the collective outcomes produced and the development of the basic cognitive and communicative competence of the individuals involved.⁴

This shift also suggests a new direction for deliberative democratic theory. Until now most deliberative democratic theory has operated largely within the confines of and as a partial corrective to liberal democratic theory. As such it has been guided by its classic assumptions regarding of the universal quality of human rationality and the largely instrumental quality of communication. The research focus suggested here calls a basic reconsideration of the theory of individuals and the relationship between them. This has both analytical and normative implications. With regard to analysis, deliberative democratic theory needs to offer a more elaborated statement of the different forms which both individual reasoning and communicative interaction may take. In so doing, particular attention must be paid to explicating the dynamic and potentially transformative relationship between the subjectivity of individual participants and the intersubjective activity in which they are engaged. With regard to normative concerns, the theory needs to offer a complementary reformulation of individual rights and appropriate forms of social relationship. With regard to rights, considerations of autonomy must balance a discussion of freedom per se with a consideration of the different kinds of freedom that individuals of different capacities may exercise. Autonomy thus becomes more a matter of a potentiality requiring facilitation than a pre-existing condition requiring the removal of constraint. In a related fashion, considerations of appropriate forms of social relationship must balance a presumption of independence and a concern for equality with a recognition of interdependence and the need for establishing relationships of complementarity that meet the differing needs and help develop the capacities of the individuals involved.⁵ Overall the empirical research implies the need for a significant reconstruction of deliberative democratic theory. As I have suggested elsewhere (Rosenberg 2002, 2003b), such a reconstruction must build on a more developmental view of individual capacities and a more constructionist view of discourse and therefore build toward a more pedagogical view of democratic engagement.

In sum, my aim in this essay was to suggest some direction for empirical research on deliberative democracy. In so doing, I have offered two complementary sets of guiding considerations. On the one hand, I suggest that research put deliberative democratic theory first and regard certain key theoretical claims regarding individuals' capacities, deliberative discourse and the outcomes of deliberation as hypotheses to be explored and tested. On the other hand, I suggest that research build on existing social and psychological work in the formulation of hypotheses and the design of research. The goal here would be to foster a reconsideration of basic assumptions regarding the qualities of persons and the nature of the interaction in a way that may lead both to more adequate definitions of the norms that should govern democratic deliberations and to more effective designs for deliberative practice.

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¹ Important work has begun. For a recent review of research see, Patterson 2003. For some examples of current research efforts, see my edited volume (Rosenberg, forthcoming).

² For a review of research on social cognition, see Fiske and Taylor (1991). For work on the various ways in which individuals make sense of social situations and problems, see Kohlberg (1981/4) and Kegan (1994). For work that explicitly addresses different forms of political reasoning, see Rosenberg (2002).

³ One influential theory of this kind is the developmental view of communicative rationality offered by Jurgen Habermas (1984/7). Unfortunately this developmental dimension of his discursive ethics plays little role in his analysis of democratic politics in Between Facts and Norms (Habermas, 1996). In my own theoretical work, I am trying to bring a consideration of differences in forms of discourse (and related differences in individuals' capacities) directly to bear on the deliberative democratic theory (Rosenberg 2002, Chapters 2 & 8; 2003a).

⁴ For example of research designed with these concerns in mind, see Rosenberg (2004).

⁵ For a more elaborated statement of this reformulation of autonomy and equality, see Rosenberg (2003b).